

1 Introduction

Established by Congress as a part of the National Park System in 1978, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) is a diverse landscape of beaches, canyons, rugged peaks and breath-taking scenery (National Park Service, u.d.). There are over 320 miles of public hiking trails within the SMMNRA, facilitating access to a unique array of flora and fauna, and to dramatic landscapes. This unique resource is located on the ‘doorstep’ of the nation’s second largest urban area, Los Angeles (see **Figure 1**, below). Inner city residents and people of color have disproportionately low access to open space in Los Angeles. Indeed, it is putatively one of the county’s most park-poor cities (Wolch, Wilson and Fehrenbach, 2002). Although the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area is well positioned to alleviate this paucity of open space in Los Angeles, it is not accessible to everyone. Those who do have access to the National Recreation Area may have differing needs and hold varying expectations as to how the recreation area and associated trails should be used.



Figure 1 The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

This report presents the findings of a recreational trail use survey conducted within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area during the summer of 2002. The

survey and report were commissioned by the National Park Service as a component of research into trail use within the SMMNRA, in preparation for the development of a Trail Management Plan. This Plan will ultimately designate trails within the SMMNRA for specific activities to minimize conflict over trail use, and will enable the National Park Service to maximize the efficiency of trail maintenance and service provision within the SMMNRA. Gaining an understanding of who uses the SMMNRA and for what purposes is critical for effective management of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area's facilities and resources. However, the study also has a role to play in the development of more equitable provision of, and access to, open space in Los Angeles in general.

Previous Surveys

Four previous surveys have been undertaken within the SMMNRA. The first, in the winter and early spring of 1980, examined recreational use within the SMMNRA. It considered park attendance and park use, together with sources of conflict between users and the "unfulfilled needs of existing users" (Lee, 1980). The second report done in 1981, based upon 132 personal interviews with key organizations, considered the potential rates of visitor use among what were then described as "urban minority" and "handicapped" populations. A third report, done in May 1993, examined two distinct sets of visitors to the SMMNRA. The first group was visitors attending the Topanga Banjo-Fiddle Contest; the second were general visitors to nine designated sites within the SMMNRA. The same survey instrument was used for both of these populations (Littlejohn, 1993). The final survey focusing on transport, was undertaken in 2000 by ORCA Consulting under contract with Parsons Brinckerhoff (ORCA Consulting, 2000). This latter survey had a relatively small sample. It considered both visitor information and potential visitor use of a proposed shuttle bus system that was under consideration by the National Park Service. The findings of these surveys are reviewed as a component of section two of this report.

The July 2002 visitor use survey enhances these earlier surveys. Although the survey instrument touched on aspects highlighted in previous studies, the survey complements rather than replicates earlier efforts. An important point of departure is that the present survey instrument was administered on-site, at a far greater number of sites than previously investigated, and addressed a wider variety of issues than those considered in previous surveys. Importantly, the survey met a key recommendation of the 1993 visitor services survey project – that future surveys reflect actual behavior of visitors, by "having visitors fill out the questionnaire as they visit the park" (Littlejohn, 1993: 3; emphasis in the original).

Purpose of the 2002 Survey

The present visitor trail use survey gathered statistics on park visitors to the SMMNRA. The survey was administered at 23 trailheads located in destination areas of the SMMNRA, and at 10 neighborhood entrances identified by National Park Service staff. The survey took place on the weekends of July 13-14 and July 20-21, 2002, along with two weekday survey periods during the intervening week on Tuesday July 16 and

Thursday July, 18, 2002. Data collected included: demographic information on visitors (age, sex, ethnicity etc); the reason for their SMMNRA visit; activities conducted whilst in the SMMNRA; distance traveled to get to the SMMNRA site; mode of travel (car, public transport etc); visitor safety issues and visitor attitudes towards nature. The survey also sought to ascertain which trails were most frequently visited during the survey period, as well as the recreational activities that occurred on those trails.



J. Byrne

Plate 1: Malibu Creek State Park

Three agencies manage most of the recreational trails in the SMMNRA – the National Park Service, the State Department of Parks and Recreation and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. A central function of the survey and associated report is to provide information to park planners from these agencies to assist in the development of an Interagency Regional Trail Management Plan for the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. The Trail Management Plan will establish the basis for trail use designation and management standards among the parkland management agencies. The survey will assist these agencies in the formulation of a program that will enhance protection of natural, cultural and recreational resources within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area while offering a diversity of recreational opportunities for park visitors. The survey provides one component of three sources of information upon which these management decisions will be based. The other two sources are a natural and cultural resource constraints analysis, and an assessment of current physical trail conditions. The survey is therefore of fundamental importance to trail planning and management within the SMMNRA.

Key Findings of the Survey

There were 12,388 people counted on trails within the National Recreation Area during the survey period. A total of 1,228 visitors (almost 10%) were invited to participate in the survey and of these only 242 declined to participate, yielding an 82%

response rate. Although 986 surveys collected, just over 7% were unusable due to response errors, inaccuracies or illegible content, leaving a functional sample of 912 surveys.



M. Joel

Plate 2: Trailhead at Leo Carillo State Park

Format of the Report

The report is divided into six sections. Following a review of the relevant literature in section two and a consideration of the survey methodology in section three, results of the survey are presented in sections four and five. The final section of the report outlines policy implications of the survey findings, and provides recommendations for the Interagency Regional Trail Management Plan Team. A comprehensive bibliography is presented at the end of the report, providing additional sources of information pertaining to, among other things, equity, accessibility, user conflict and trail management. The report also contains several appendices that present raw data in tabular form.